

5. September 2022

Joy in suffering

Note: By a mistake, we have today taken the reading corresponding to the odd-numbered year. However, it allows us to meditate on a very important theme for the Christian life, which will certainly be profitable for many.

Col 1:24-2:3

It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church, of which I was made a servant with the responsibility towards you that God gave to me, that of completing God's message, the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his holy people. It was God's purpose to reveal to them how rich is the glory of this mystery among the gentiles; it is Christ among you, your hope of glory: this is the Christ we are proclaiming, admonishing and instructing everyone in all wisdom, to make everyone perfect in Christ. And it is for this reason that I labour, striving with his energy which works in me mightily. I want you to know, then, what a struggle I am having on your behalf and on behalf of those in Laodicea, and on behalf of so many others who have never seen me face to face. It is all to bind them together in love and to encourage their resolution until they are rich in the assurance of their complete understanding and have knowledge of the mystery of God in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.

To be able to rejoice in the midst of suffering is a high level in the school of the Lord. Initially, one may be frightened by a statement like the one we heard today from St. Paul, especially when one is confronted with one's own inability to suffer and realises that one often does not know how to deal with suffering in the right way.

In order not to give rise to misunderstandings, it is worth clarifying that the normal human reaction is to avoid suffering as far as possible, because, like death, it is a reality that is profoundly alien to the human being. In a way, we could say that suffering is not part of God's original plan for our life; rather, it is a consequence of original sin, of separation from God.

Let us remember that the Lord himself asked his Father three times in the garden of Gethsemane that, if possible, the cup might pass from him without having to drink it (Mt 26:39). It should therefore come as no surprise that suffering frightens us and that we find it difficult to accept. The process of giving our "yes" to the cross, receiving it from God's hands, is a journey that has to be made and usually takes a long time. Nor should we skip the necessary steps out of a false religious zeal, because if we do so, we may not be able to cope with the situation of suffering in the long run, because we have not internalised it sufficiently.

Let us look at St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. He knew suffering. In fact, immediately after his conversion, Jesus told him through Ananias: *"I myself will show him how much he must suffer for my name"* (Acts 9:16). In today's reading, the Apostle himself reveals to us his deepest motivation, which makes him capable of accepting the suffering that comes with the fulfilment of his mission, to such an extent that his sufferings become for him a joy: *"In my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church"*.

The following lines of his Epistle show us how it is that the Apostle could utter such words. It was his great love for Jesus and the knowledge of his glory that made him fight tirelessly for the churches to remain faithful to the Lord. St. Paul had understood that he could offer his suffering to the Heavenly Father by uniting it to the suffering of Our Lord.

Thus the heaviness of the cross underwent a transformation through love, because he bore it for the Lord's sake and for the mission entrusted to him. From this came the Apostle's joy in his sufferings, knowing that they could be fruitful and that in them he resembled his Lord.

This is the way in which our suffering - that is, our cross - can also become fruitful. We have to open it to God, so that suffering can be removed from its own dynamic, from its heaviness, from its negativity, from that which wants to sink us and weigh us down without remedy. In this way we can overcome it and make it fruitful. On this path our love for the Lord grows, and certainly also his love for us. If we serve him in the midst of suffering, are we not giving him a proof of our love? And how could the Lord not see it?

"I know your activities, your hard work and your perseverance. (...). You have suffered for my name without fainting" - says the Lord in the Apocalypse to the church of Ephesus (Rev 2:2). He will also give us to understand that He sees our efforts to accept the cross from His hand and to carry it.

It will help us to immerse ourselves more and more in the abyss of God's wisdom, like St. Paul, so that it floods our soul and we can give ourselves to the Lord with joy and gratitude. In this way we will be better able to endure the dark hours, and even make them bear fruit for the Kingdom of God, sustained by His grace.

For those who want to go deeper into this topic, I recommend listening to this lecture on "How to deal with suffering and death": <https://youtu.be/dyd1b03I3Wo>